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SUBJECT: MUSLIM SUPPORT FOR WEST BENGAL'S COMMUNISTS ERODING

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: One of the factors which contributed to the Communist Party of India - Marxist's (CPM) significant losses in the May panchayat (local, district and village-level) elections was the erosion of Muslim support. This growing Muslim disaffection was prompted by the 2007 Sachar Committee report highlighting the lower socio-economic conditions of the Muslim community, and perceptions that the CPM-led state government's land acquisition for industrial development disproportionately impacted poor Muslim farmers. The panchayat election results and statements by senior government officials indicated that many Muslims abandoned the Communist party, traditionally seen as the Muslims' secular protector in the face of Hindu nationalism. Muslims have formed an umbrella group of smaller Muslim political parties to protect themselves, sometimes violently from land acquisition proposed by the state government. Recognizing the growing Muslim opposition, the GOWB has delayed acquisition of land for industrial projects and intends to direct government programs to the Muslim community. The Muslim disillusionment with the CPM does not reflect an Islamic radicalization but rather a response to perceptions that the CPM has done little for the community. However, Muslim feelings of alienation could be exploited by radical individuals or groups if allowed to fester. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The CPM-led Left Front's losses in four West Bengal districts in the May panchayat (local body) elections, especially in Muslim-dominated areas, reflected the party's eroding support among the minority community. The CPM experienced big losses in East Midnapore, the district where land acquisition violence occurred in the past year around Nandigram, and in South 24-Parganas -- two districts where Muslims have a significant presence. In addition, the combined effects of land disputes over a new Tata car factory, slow economic development and violence by CPM cadres also resulted in significant losses in Singur, Hooghly district. The CPM's own data show a general decline in Muslim support as now only 14.67 per cent of its members in West Bengal are Muslim (as of 2007), down from 14.90 per cent in 2004 and 15.2 per cent in 2001. Yet, Muslims constitute by some estimates almost a third of the state's population. In absolute terms, of the CPM's 321,682 members in West Bengal only 47,190 are Muslim.

¶3. (SBU) CPM leaders have admitted that farmers' fears of land acquisition for industry and the lack of development for the minority Muslim community as described in the 2007 Sachar Committee report contributed the slide in Muslim support. In a June 10 meeting with ConGen, WB Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee acknowledged that Muslim farmers are apprehensive

about losing their land. Bhattacharjee admitted candidly that the Muslims appeared to have voted against the CPM during the recent local body elections. The Chief Minister claimed that some "extremist elements" within the Muslim community were active in fostering anti-Communist sentiment. He specifically mentioned West Bengal Jamaat-e-Ulema-Hind (JUH) State Secretary Siddiqullah Choudhury as a local Muslim leader seeking to exacerbate anti-CPM feelings. He added that Choudhury financed his activities from fees in granting halal or Islamic certification for food products. (Note: ConGen met Choudhury in 2007, which was widely protested by CPM officials as foreign interference. Post has no information regarding Choudhury's "extremist" activities; however, other law enforcement officials have said that Choudhury has religious fundamentalist links. End Note.)

14. (SBU) On June 11, West Bengal Chief Secretary Amit Kiran Deb also told ConGen that there was a definite unhappiness among Muslims towards the CPM in the recent local body elections. However, he added that Muslim voting against the CPM may not persist if the government addresses some of their concerns and provides better government services, education and employment opportunities. Deb also said that the state government has slowed the process of acquiring 5,000 acres of land needed for creation of a new airport.

Nandigram Shows the Way

15. (SBU) Political Scientist Sabyasachi Basu Roychowdhury noted that previously during the early 1990's that the GOWB had taken land for industrial and housing projects in Falta and Rajarhat areas, which also had significant Muslim populations. However, objections were muted due to the fear of the CPM's strength. Last year's efforts to acquire land in Nandigram in East Midnapore district, was a watershed as it demonstrated that the

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CPM could be challenged. Much of the violence was in two blocks in the Nandigram village area that had around a 58 percent Muslim population. Other areas which were earmarked for land acquisition were Bhangur and Dankuni, which have Muslim populations of over 30 per cent. The GOWB put the Dankuni development project and land acquisition on hold following the panchayat elections. Roychowdhury felt that the Muslims learned from the Nandigram experience that peaceful protests had failed in the past and that only through the violence had land acquisition been elevated to a serious political issue.

16. (SBU) Roychowdhury believed that for the Muslims strong, violent protest was the only way to stop the CPM's intimidation. Whether accurate not, among the Muslim community he felt that there was a pervasive feeling that the CPM-led state government was intent on taking over the land where Muslims were in majority and depended on land for their livelihood. Particularly in East Midnapore and Hooghly districts, Muslim fears escalated with the feeling that CPM was not maintaining its secular principles. However, Roychowdhury stressed that the Nandigram violence committed in March and November 2007 was political and not communal. The protest by the local villagers was over proposed land acquisition and not on religious issues, he added. However, the voting pattern which led to the Left Front's losses showed that Muslims appeared to have voted against the CPM in significant numbers. As a result, for the first time in 31 years, the election results reflected a distinct dent in the Left's rural support base.

Muslim Have Groups But Not Organized

17. (SBU) As a sign of the coalescing Muslim political identity and activism which has taken place in the last year, eight Muslim organizations in West Bengal, with differing ideological and political stands, created a coalition to tackle the

"indifferent" attitude of the state government towards minorities. The Council, named the Milli Ittehad Parishad (MIP), was constituted in September 2007 with representation from several Muslim organizations, including the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, Shahri Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith, Milli Council, Sunnat Aljamaat, Shia Asna Asari and the Muslim Institute. The Council is led by Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind's Siddiqullah Choudhury and has the patronage of the Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat and Qari Fazlur Rahman, Imam-Eidain (Imam who leads the largest congregation of prayer on the day of Id).

18. (SBU) In West Bengal the JUH historically has been close to the Congress party and relatively quiet until the Nandigram land acquisition became violent. Following Nandigram, Choudhury began a strident anti-CPM campaign on the issue of land acquisition targeting Muslims. Sources add that Muslim activists, who were normally "loyal" to the ruling Left Front, had extended their support to the MIP's call of voting against the CPM. However, Muslim contacts admit that the community is not homogenous and it lacks specific political agendas. The Muslim parties have both fundamentalist as well as liberal elements and have little cohesion. The MIP members found a strong leader in Choudhury and rallied around him hoping to be part of the agitations. Land acquisition inflamed the common Muslim farmer and Chowdhury became the visible face of the protests.

CPM Appeasing Muslims

19. (SBU) The erosion of CPM's Muslim votes, indicated by the rural poll results, has prompted the CPM-led GOWB to start a survey to assess the weak development in the Muslim community and to find out ways to address the community's problems. The GOWB has also announced that it is considering reservations in government jobs for the Muslims. West Bengal's Finance Minister Asim Dasgupta has raised the budget for the minority affairs department from USD 42 million to USD 75 million and each government department has created a special fund for minority development and madrasa education. The government also has plans to recruit about 1,000 madrasa teachers by 2008 and around 4,000 in the next three years. There are about 10,000 madrasa teachers at present. Minority Affairs Minister Dr. Abdus Sattar told the press that that the state government will assess the level of literacy and basic services like clean drinking water, toilets, roads and health facilities provided to the minority or the Muslim community.

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Comment

110. (SBU) The CPM was not targeting Muslim farmers specifically when its Party members sought to enforce the GOWB's efforts to acquire land for industrial development. Rather, the Muslim's growing population in the state and their incidental presence in the areas intended for industrial development put them in conflict with the CPM. Historically, the CPM had used the Muslims as a vote bank, turning a blind eye to illegal migration from Bangladesh and liberally providing ration and voting cards to all. The CPM had until recently successfully portrayed itself as a strictly secular party and defender of Muslims against Hindu nationalists. In the fallout of the violence around Nandigram and Singur villages, in which Muslims were attacked by CPM cadres, the CPM experienced a backlash among the Muslim community.

111. (SBU) Comment Continued: Some Muslim groups and leaders such as Siddiqullah Choudhury have taken advantage of this political shift to project themselves as representing the community's interests. So far the Muslim disillusionment with the CPM is being directed to forming political associations or groups such as the MIP, which in a positive sense channels Muslim disaffection within the existing political process.

Muslims may simply shift their vote or interests from the CPM to Muslim parties. However, the broader concern is that Muslim alienation could also provide a receptive environment in which radical groups or individuals could operate. In response, the GOWB will need be sensitive to the impact of its land acquisition on the Muslim community and will have to follow through on its plans to improve the Muslim community's access to education, health care and employment to address the issues outlined in the Sachar Commission Report. However, the state government has a poor record in planning and in providing basic public services in general. Rather, Muslim disaffection will likely continue and radicalization of some members of the community is a distinct possibility.

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